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SUBJECT: OAS RELOCATES GUATEMALANS FROM ADJACENCY ZONE

REF: GUATEMALA 00944

1. Summary: On April 30, HROff attended the inauguration of a community constructed by the Organization of American States (OAS) to relocate Guatemalans living in the "Adjacency Zone" between Belize and Guatemala. Twenty families moved voluntarily from Nueva Juda on the Belizean side of the border, where they had lived since 2001, to wooden homes built by the OAS in Melchor de Mencos, Peten. This ceremony marked a significant step forward in the Confidence Building Measures for the border conflict. End Summary.

#### Background

2. In the Confidence Building Measures passed in February 2003, Belize and Guatemala agreed that all Guatemalans living in the Adjacency Zone before October 2000 (when a survey was done by the OAS) could remain, but any future settlers must be relocated. Since that time, Guatemalans have continued to move into the Adjacency Zone, especially into the Nueva Juda community. Over the past year, the OAS found 55 families that admitted to settling in Barrio Nueva Juda since October 2000 (allegedly after the former FRG Mayor of Melchor started selling tracts of land illegally), all of whom have now voluntarily agreed to relocate and dismantle their former homes. April 30, on land donated by the Guatemalan municipality, the OAS inaugurated the completion of the first 20 houses of this relocation project. In the next several months, the OAS plans to complete another 35 homes, a school, small town hall, and sports fields for children.

3. Attended by Ambassadors and government officials from both Belize and Guatemala, the inauguration had a celebratory air. After speeches by the Mayors of Melchor de Mencos and the Belizean parallel community, Benque Viejo, and Belizean Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, visiting delegates ceremoniously distributed deeds and keys to the homes, which were assigned to families through a lottery.

4. Good-will between citizens on both sides of the border seemed widespread and genuine, and was especially evident when the mayors of the twin Guatemalan and Belizean communities, who grew up neighbors and remain close friends, danced together on stage. Members of the Nueva Juda community reported being extremely satisfied with their new homes. Teresa Casanova Trujillo, mayor of the Melchor de Mencos, told HROff that the border conflict was primarily a political issue centered in the capitals and that residents of both sides of the border live as neighbors with few tensions.

5. One issue that continues to cause tension in the Adjacency Zone is Guatemalan collection of xate, a commercial plant marketed widely in Europe. Hundreds of impoverished Guatemalan farmers venture over the contended area on a daily basis to collect the leaves of the easily damaged plant, occasionally causing incidents with Belizean border patrols working to protect borders (RefTel).

6. Comment: The inauguration was a welcome sign of confidence building between border zone residents, the GOG, GOB, and OAS in the lead-up to discussions at the OAS. With the first residents of Nueva Juda in Melchor de Mencos happily settled in their new homes, prospects for further progress seem brighter.

HAMILTON